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The Honorable Kenneth Kurtz
Chairman, House Committee on Families, Children & Seniors
P.O. Box 30014
Lansing, MI 48914

March 21, 2012

Dear Representative Kurtz,

Over the last few years I have sat by and watched as 29 other states passed autism insurance legislation. I've often wondered why Michigan isn't one of them. These states recognized the medical, societal, family and business benefits, and faced the choice that comes with autism insurance legislation: Pay now, or pay later.

One in 110 children born today is affected by autism, the fastest growing developmental disability with symptoms and characteristics that vary from individual to individual. Many children struggle with social or communication skills, and can only express their frustrations through unmanageable behavior brought on by everyday activities like a trip to the grocery store, or a surprise visit by grandma.

Autism was once thought to be untreatable, but early intervention, diagnoses and therapy such as applied behavior analysis, speech therapy, or occupational therapy can improve the individual's functioning and give him/her the opportunity to be a contributing member of society. But therapy is expensive, and health care plans in Michigan usually exclude proven medical treatment for autism.

What's staggering is what autism costs society. According to the Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine, we pay \$3.2 million to care for an individual with autism over their lifetime. The largest direct cost is adult care for individuals unable to work or live independently. The Autism Society estimates those costs can be reduced by two-thirds based on the 2007 Government Accountability Office Report on Autism – that's a savings of more than two million dollars.

Michigan businesses could also benefit from insurance coverage. Parents who have children with autism are leaving their jobs and moving to states with autism coverage because they can't wait for Michigan to catch up. Others are forced to reduce their hours due to child care issues or need to stay home all together. Coverage would not only retain these employees but increase productivity.

Since the State of Michigan hasn't yet passed autism legislation, families are left with a difficult choice – accumulate overwhelming debt after spending as much as \$50,000 per year in therapy, or forego treatment and accept that their child may never be able to overcome his/her symptoms and, in some cases, require lifelong care. In addition, the increase in stress families with autism experience takes a toll on their jobs, their health, and often their marriage.

Pay now or pay later? We can continue to convince ourselves that we're saving money by putting off this legislation. But by doing so, we choose to ignore the benefits of early intervention and make the choice to endure the potential consequences of a life dependent on government programs.

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Obvious benefits aside, children are in the middle of this debate – we need to give them every opportunity for a functional, happy life.

I strongly encourage legislators to look at the true benefits to society. Perhaps then, Michigan will come alongside 29 other states that have already made a choice to put children as their highest priority.

If you have any questions, or would like to talk further about the importance of this legislation, please don't hesitate to call me at 616.726.1890 or pweaver@hopenetwork.org.

Bless you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Phil Weaver", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Phil Weaver
President & CEO
Hope Network

Cc: Members, House Committee on Families, Children & Seniors
Lt. Governor Brian Calley
Senate Majority Leader Randy Richardville
Speaker Jase Bolger
Senator Mike Green
Senator Tupac Hunter